REVEALED: How shadowy unit of government 'thought police' set up by ex-MI6 agent is trying to keep a lid on Britain's simmering racial tensions

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While the streets of **Belfast** were ablaze with anti-immigration protests last week, behind the scenes a group of spies, spinners and soldiers were deploying the 'dark arts' to try to defuse tensions.

The name of the secretive Government propaganda unit trying to manipulate events makes it sound like an innocuous back-office operation – the Research, Information and Communications Unit, or RICU.

But the dull moniker is part of the deliberate camouflage of an outfit which uses deception and skulduggery to try to manage the 'challenges' of multiculturalism.

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Its techniques range from planting stories in the media, using undercover operatives to lay flowers at the scene of terrorist attacks and even, in one case, sending a pop group to sing anti-extremist songs in Muslim schools.

The 22-strong unit was established in 2007 by the late Charles Farr, a former **MI6** officer, as part of the Prevent counter-terrorism strategy.

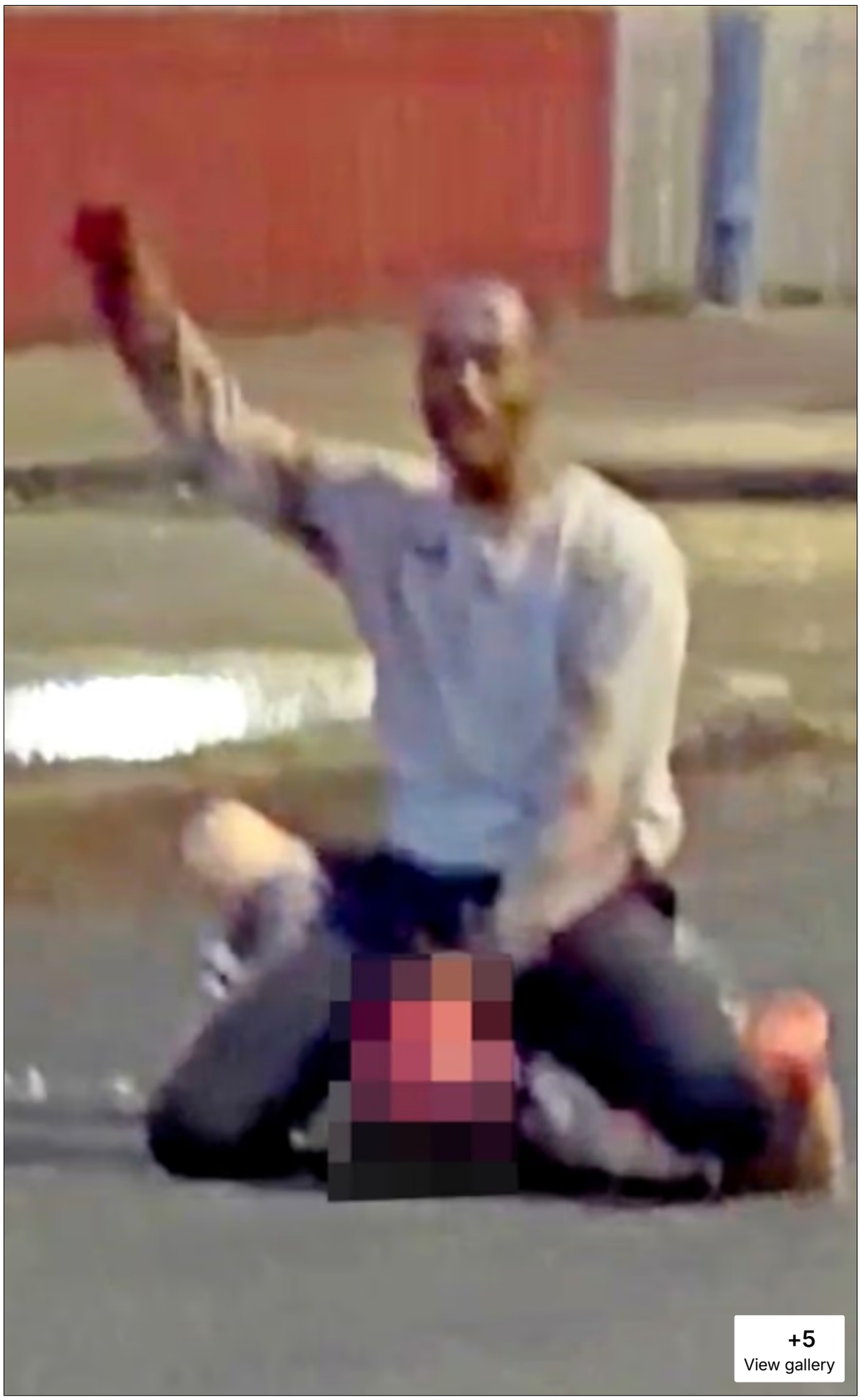
Modelled on the Information Research Department (IRD), a propaganda unit established by the Attlee government in 1948 to blacken the names of communists and other political opponents, RICU operates out of the **Home Office**'s Westminster headquarters.

While its original purpose was to monitor and challenge the spread of Al Qaeda propaganda and to vet the language used by public officials when describing terrorism, its tentacles now stretch far across Whitehall – to the extent that critics say it risks strangling free speech.

When the mobs took to the streets of Northern Ireland last week following the stabbing of Stephen Ogilvie, allegedly by Hadi Alodid, a 30-year-old Sudanese asylum-seeker, RICU swung into action to advise the police in the province on how to 'control the narrative'.

Houses, cars and bus set on fire in Belfast protests

Pictured: Police vehicles deployed water cannons in Belfast on June 10, after the streets were ablaze with anti-immigration protests last week following a knife attack on June 8



The riots in Belfast came after the stabbing of Stephen Ogilvie, allegedly by Hadi Alodid, a 30-year-old Sudanese asylum-seeker

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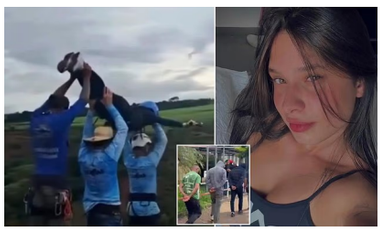

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A source said: 'They are working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland's C3 intelligence unit to identify those posting the online 'calls to protest' in Belfast and other areas, as well as giving strategic messages to the police to ensure that the protesters were portrayed as unsympathetic thugs, rather than activists, and effecting behavioural change.'

The source said that the unit had also been advising the police in Southampton following the horrific murder of Henry Nowak by Vickrum Digwa – who falsely claimed he had been racially abused and had acted in self-defence – saying: 'RICU made sure that the liaison team dealing with the family were well briefed.'

It has also been claimed that the unit intervenes to write statements by the families of victims of potentially racially linked incidents to stop them from inflaming tensions further with their remarks.

The source said: 'You can see their fingerprints all over the statements released by the families of victims in these volatile situations – they usually have a similar tone.'

However, RICU is regarded by many Whitehall insiders to be 'out of control', after last year putting its name to a Home Office recommendation that the police should record more 'non-crime hate incidents' – the controversial, sub-criminal measures used to inhibit people from making reference to matters of race, religion, sexual orientation or disability.

Ministers finally bowed to pressure by scrapping the measures, telling the police to stop recording everyday rows and online spats.

The unit also claimed that the prevalence of sexual grooming gangs in Pakistani communities was being exploited by the far-Right to stir up hatred against Muslim communities.

It has a long history of 'covertly engineering', in the words of one expert, 'the thoughts of people' at times of crisis, being quick to spring into action after terrorist incidents such as the London Bridge attacks in 2017. Eight people died when a van was driven into pedestrians on London Bridge and the three occupants ran to a nearby market and began stabbing people.

Henry Nowak (pictured) was arrested by police after being stabbed by his attacker, sparking outrage across the country. He died from his injuries

Vickrum Digwa (pictured) was sentenced to life in prison over the killing of Henry Nowak

In the immediate aftermath of the atrocity, RICU's undercover operatives handed out flowers in the area, with the aim of perpetuating an atmosphere of 'grief' rather than anti-Muslim 'anger'.

A team in an unmarked van is also understood to have toured the area plastering the walls with posters bearing hashtags such as #TurnToLove, #ForLondon and #LoveWillWin.

Similarly, after the British aid worker Alan Henning was decapitated by Islamic State in Syria in 2014, RICU used a specially created 'front operation' to plant an image of a woman in a Union Jack hijab in the media.

And in one particularly bizarre case, the unit secretly funded a boyband in 2016 to tour Muslim areas of Britain to sing songs with anti-radicalisation themes. The British-American pop trio, known as Mr Meanor, visited schools in Sheffield, Manchester and Runcorn.

They included Parrs Wood High School in Manchester, where a former student was revealed to have travelled to Syria.

Among the songs sung by the group were Think About It, which includes references to the 9/11 terror attacks in New York in 2001 and the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005.

It includes the lyrics: 'See these hashtags all night, Turn the TV on and something else ain't right, More people gone don't know how we sleep at night. What I'm hoping is we can lead a precious life, 9/11 changes how we view these things, People want to terrorise, And 7/7 left behind more broken lives right before our eyes.'

In June 2017, Darren Osborne, a recent convert to far-Right ideology, drove a white van into a crowd of pedestrians close to Finsbury Park mosque in north London, killing one person and injuring ten. Reports at the time said that Osborne had been held down and beaten by people at the scene, until an imam appealed to them to stop.

It later emerged that the reports about the peace-making imam had originated after journalists were approached at the police cordon by a woman called 'Gabbie', who said she worked for a company called 'Horizon PR' and offered to introduce them to a third party who 'stressed to the journalists the role that the mosque's imam had played in protecting Osborne until he could be handed over to police'.

The story was the work of an agency called Breakthrough Media – which had been paid by RICU.

The unit's fingerprints were also all over the hashtag #WeStandTogether which appeared on Twitter afterwards and was shared by prominent politicians, police commanders and the London Fire Brigade.

RICU frequently uses social media in this way to infiltrate online conversations in 'target communities'.

However, according to Sir William Shawcross, who published a review of Prevent in 2023, the unit seems more keen to target the far-Right than extreme Islamists.

Sir William wrote: 'The bar for what RICU includes on Islamism looks to be relatively high, whereas the bar for what is included on the extreme Right-wing is comparably low.'

By way of illustrating his point, in 2023 the unit identified viewing habits which it believed indicate that someone could be susceptible to far-Right views. These included Michael Portillo's Great British Railway Journeys, The Thick Of It and Yes Minister, all on the BBC. Works by Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton were described as 'key texts' of interest to 'white nationalists/supremacists'.

Mr Portillo, a former Tory minister, reacted to the leaked report by saying: 'Why are senior officials, at least, not trying to stop this stuff before it pops up and embarrasses ministers in the Government?'

Security expert Professor Anthony Glees responded: 'The unit that produced this report is called RICU.

'It's based in the Home Office but it's in that kind of shadowy area between what the Home Office does and what the security service MI5 ought to be doing. Or what the special branch used to do before it was turned into the counter-terrorist police force.'

The unit has also cited work by The Spectator journalists Rod Liddle and Douglas Murray as contributing to

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'negative views about Islam and Muslims via the pages of mainstream publications'.

It also cited a book on the Rotherham rape gangs and work by The Mail on Sunday journalist Peter Hitchens, and a RICU document from 2019 described former Cabinet minister Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg as being among figures 'associated with far-Right sympathetic audiences and Brexit'.

Sir Jacob accused RICU of 'wasting effort on elected politicians scandalously diverting resources from evil-doers'.

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When Defence Secretary Dan Jarvis was asked about the unit last year – he was security minister at the time – and its claim that the scandal of grooming gangs was being exploited by the far-Right, he said: 'Many documents are produced across Government that are not implemented and do not constitute Government policy.'

A Home Office spokesman said: 'RICU provides analysis on extremist use of propaganda and exploitation of the internet to inform the UK's counter terrorism system. We cannot comment on its operations.'